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ANGELO

A Poem

BY

STUART STERNE, *friend*

Bloede, Gertrude



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TO
RICHARD GRANT WHITE,
WHOSE MOST MAGNANIMOUS APPRECIATION
OF WHAT LITTLE HAD BEEN DONE,
WHOSE NOBLE CONFIDENCE IN WHAT MORE MIGHT YET BE DONE,
BY ONE HE DID NOT KNOW AND HAD NEVER SEEN,
LIKE A FLOOD OF GENEROUS SUNSHINE
EARLIER QUICKENED INTO GROWTH WHATEVER POWERS,
WHATEVER GERMS AND POSSIBILITIES OF HIGHER DEVELOPMENT
THAT STRANGER MAY POSSESS,
WITH THE EARNEST HOPE THAT HE MAY FIND IT
WORTHIER OF HIS ACCEPTANCE THAN HE COULD HAVE FOUND
ANY PREVIOUS EFFORT,
This Labor of Love
IN WARMEST GRATITUDE IS DEDICATED
BY
S. S.

Above all, he loved Vittoria Colonna, Marchesa of Pescara, of whose divine spirit he was enamored, being in return most sincerely beloved by her. She several times left the places where she had gone to spend the summer, and came to Rome, for no other purpose than to see Michel Angelo, and he in return bore her so great a love, that I remember hearing him say that nothing grieved him save that when he went to see her as she was passing from this life he had not kissed her brow or her cheeks as he kissed her hand. — CONDIVI, Life of Michel Angelo.

ANGELO.

VESPERS were ended. The last clouds of incense,
Whose fragrant wreaths, rising from out the cen-
ser

The pretty boy had swung, obscured an instant
The high old altarpiece, — the Saviour toiling
Beneath the burden of his cross up hill, —
Were faded now ; the chanting voices silent ;
The deep-toned organ hushed, whose mighty breath
Filled the dim arches of the vaulted dome
With strains divine ; the benediction given ;
The parting bell rung, whose last, singing echoes
And faint vibrations slowly died away
On the soft, balmy air. The worshipers
Streamed from the heavy portal, dark with age,
And carved by master-hand with many a quaint
And fanciful device of angel faces,
And grinning masks, and clustering fruit and
flowers,
And slowly parting, here and there dispersed :

Some sauntering leisurely to stately homes,
Others bending their swifter steps in haste
Towards humble cots, till all were lost to view,
Their robes long gleaming gayly everywhere
Along the windings of the path that led
Up to the chapel on the hill. Its brow
O'erlooked the country spreading far around
The Eternal City on her seven hills,
Upon whose sides, amid the pillared mansions
Nestling in dark-hued, never-fading green,
Showed here and there great flecks of russet
marks

Of the advancing autumn, but as yet
Clad with full verdure by the dense-leaved vines
That decked them everywhere. Valley and hills,
And the great, yellow river sluggishly
Washing their foot, all bathed and flooded now
By the last mellow light of golden evening;
The sun already hanging low, the shadows
E'en now half purpling in the deeper dells
Where his beams reached no more.

From out the chapel
The portly priest had passed, with smile benign,
And muttered, "Peace be with you, my good
children!"

Dispensing blessings from his plump, white hands

To such old crones as hung about him, eager
To catch them, or to touch the garments of
The reverend father. In the cool, broad aisles,
Beneath the quiet arches,—here what lingered
Of sultry summer still, too loath to go,
In the warm air outside, had never entered,—
None stayed now save the group close by the
altar,
Near the stained window, where the sun, that
poured
Through the wide open doors in one broad
stream
Upon the marble floor, fell softly, broken
To many-colored, glowing lights. A cluster
Of men engaged in eager speech, some wearing
The gay-hued liveries of the courtier, others
In the more sober garb of priest or scholar,
Speakers and listeners both, gathered round her
Who sat among them like one graciously
Holding her court. A court that ever grew,
For some who had cared little to attend
The holy services, yet hungered for
This other feast, now wending up the hill,
Entered to join the rest.

Among them, too,
Came Angelo, in converse with the friend

Who brought him hither. As he crossed the
threshold,

A swift, slight thrill—he marveled could it be
But the cool shadows that enfolded them
So suddenly after their hasty walk—
Shook all his heart an instant.

Ah, small need,
He thought, as his keen glance flew through the
church,

Even had a thousand other women thronged it,—
There was but one save her, a little maid
Standing behind her chair, whose idle gaze
Or vaguely wandered round her listlessly,
Or curiously was fixed on each new comer,—
Small need, in truth, to question which was she!
So must, so could but she alone have looked
Whose fame, whose virtues, and whose rare, sweet
beauty

Filling the world, so oft rang in his ears,
Making her name familiar as a song
Long known and loved.

Some others were before him
And as they were presented to her favor
Angelo noted she received them seated,
With but a gracious motion of her hand,
And bending slightly forward. But when he

Advanced to her, she rose and came to meet
him,

And when he, forced to sudden reverence, awed
By something in her presence, bowed full low,
With half humility, the stalwart frame
That was not wont to bend to friend or foe,
She cried out eagerly, stretching her hand, —
“Nay, nay, Maestro! suffer that I take
Your own in mine, the noble master-hand,
That so most swift and faithfully obeys
What the still nobler master-mind commands,
Has made the world rich in immortal works,
And for your brow plucked shining laurels time
Can never fade!”

And when most willingly
He yielded her his hand, she added softly,
And 't was but now he heard her gentle voice
Was sweet as music, —

“Aye, in truth, Maestro,
This day, long wished for, is a golden one
Within the record of my life!”

“Surely
In mine no less, Marchesa!” said he, simply.
“You honor me too much, illustrious lady!
I'd come ere now to pay my grateful homage
To one it was so long my wish to some time

Meet face to face, yet 't is but three days since
That I returned here from my journey north,
Where I was much detained."

"Let us be seated,"

She said again, and stepping back through those
Upon whose busy tongues silence had fallen
As Angelo approached, who one and all
Saluted reverently and made way,
Prayed him sit by her side.

"And you, my friends,"

She asked, turning to them once more, "will you
Not now take up again the broken thread
Of your discourse?" And then to Angelo, —
"We were discussing as you came, Maestro,
The sister arts of brush and chisel, wherein
You are consummate master."

"How, Marchesa,

You bid us now continue," one rejoined,
"Here before him, the lion in our path!"
Glancing half timidly at Angelo,
"Who might confound us all with but a breath,
If it so pleased him?"

"Aye, and wherefore not?

Another in gay garb, with laughing eyes,
Cried out more boldly. "Have we each of us
Not his own head upon his shoulders? What

If none dispute how Master Angelo
Towers like a giant over all us pigmies,
The greatest of his age and clime!"

And seeing

How Angelo himself by a grave smile,
And motion of his hand to heed him not,
Approved the manly speech, they all fell back
Into their former converse. The Marchesa
Listened most part in silence, earnestly
Sometimes, and sometimes half amused, but
rarely

Joining in any argument, yet ever
Turning to Angelo with some remark
In tone subdued; and once she asked, "Maestro,
Does all this chatter vex you? Say the word,
And I will send them all away!" "No, no!"
He answered, who had scarce once lent his ear
To all they said, but sat wrapt up and lost
In silent contemplation of herself.

How passing fair she was, how stately still,
She who had been so many years a wife,
And then a mourning widow! Time nor grief
Had power to dim the lustre of her beauty,
And what they took from it of the first flower
Of youth and freshness, rendered amply back,

In all the charms of mellow womanhood.
How like a queen of ripest, royal blood,
Yet half unconscious of her sovereign state,
With mildness crowned more than with majesty,
Grave gentleness and winning dignity
Most happily blended with a girlish grace
In form and features ! A white brow so placid
It seemed eternal peace shone there serene ;
And yet about the delicate lips, carved proudly,
But full of latent sweetness, a fine trace
Of secret pain, that told how this great peace
Was won not without struggle, gained, mayhap,
Through bitter storms enough. In her deep
eyes

A calm, still light, as in the gaze of one
Whose hopes are set above all earthly things,
Beyond or time or death unchangeably
Fixed on eternity. The delicate cheek
But faintly tinted with the quiet blood
That yet sometimes played easily through it,
coming

And going swiftly ; her luxuriant hair,
Like pale red gold, humbly bound back, and
gathered

Into a simple coil, yet not so close
But that some willful locks had burst their fetters

And now hung loosely quivering on her shoulders
Beneath the dense, dark veil of finest web,
Nevermore laid aside since the first days
Of ceaseless sorrow. Her robe, too, was dark,
Of some rich, sombre fabric, without sheen,
That broke into deep shadows and dim lights,
Where from her waist it flowed in heavy folds
Down to the floor, concealing the light foot ;—
Confined upon her gently heaving bosom
By one great, shimmering pearl, — a precious tear,
So fancied Angelo. A plain gold circle,
Her marriage ring, on her white, slender hand ;
An ivory rosary and crucifix,
Carved richly, and emitting some fine fragrance
Suspended from her girdle.

Thus she sat

Unconscious of the gaze that hung on her,
But more and more enrapt, clung ever closer,
Like to an eager bee upon some flower
O'erflowing with sweet honey, thirstily
Drank in each tint and line of beauty, rounded
So marvelously to a perfect whole,
Fed on each look, each breath ; till, when at last
A pause had fallen in the gay converse round
 them,
She turned to him again, —

“And you, Maestro,
Who have of all the first right to be heard,
Will you not speak and teach us now?”

And yielding
At once to her all-powerful, gentle sway,
Forgetting or unheeding his reserve
And wonted silence, all his grim dislike
To speak thus openly of things knit up
As closely with his soul as God himself,
That were that soul's own deepest life, melting
In the one great desire to do her pleasure,
He rose and stood among the rest, took up
The tangled skein of their discourse, where they
Half hopelessly had dropped it, and confirming
The arguments of some, confounding others, —
All drawing round him in respectful silence, —
Soon made it a clear woof, feeling how, 'neath
The mild light of that quiet eye, he warmed
To so great, unaccustomed eloquence
That he himself grew half amazed at his
Own glowing words.

She in her turn now, noting
The rugged features, the keen, blazing eye,
The form unbent, the rapid, strengthful motion,
The hair still dark, scarce touched with threads
of silver,

All the unbroken vigor of his presence, —
Gazed at him long in reverent admiration,
And tender, grateful wonder ; marveling how
Labor and time and much reverse of fortune,
The weary years, whose weight had long bowed
others

To aged, feeble men, had left no trace
Of weakness here, passed so most harmless, dealt
So kindly by him, seeming but to carve
More deeply and enduringly the lines
Upon that powerful brow, and knit more firmly
The muscles of the elastic, iron frame.
So stood he 'mid the others, as among
The pliant, pale-green saplings of the wood,
The sturdy oak, uprooted not, nor shaken
By all the fiercest tempests that had tossed
Its mighty crown.

Once 'mid his speech he saw
The low sun, creeping round, now touched her
hair,
Whose golden threads threw back the sister
beams,
With a mild glow, casting a radiant halo
About her head, that shone with double brightness
Against the dark face of the suffering Saviour
On the great altarpiece. And Angelo

Cried in his soul, — “O beauteous, pure and
saintly,

As e'er the Virgin Mother of the Lord!”

While she, perceiving the too fiery glance,
And blinded by the light, moved half aside,
And drew her veil still closer, over e'en
The last, small, gleaming lock, Angelo fancying
The sunbeams all were vanished, and the shad-
ows

Swift deepening round them.

When he paused at length
She said, “I thank you from my heart, Maestro!
This was an hour, in truth, as full of profit
As of delight to me, and surely herein
I speak for all! Now, as a further favor,
Pray tell me if you think 't were easily done
To build a chapel near here, on the brow
Of this same hill, by the old portico
Moss-grown and ivy-covered, whence 't is said
The cruel Emperor looked down in triumph
Upon the conflagration of the city,
Where his own bloody hand had flung the fire
brand,

Woe and destruction. There would I erect
A cloister, so the feet of pious women
Might sanctify again the spot, so long

Made desecrate by that unhallowed spirit;—
What think you, Messer Angelo?"

"I fancy
It were not difficult,—the site well chosen,
If memory serve me. But when we depart
We may perchance pass by there, if so please
you,
And I then speak more fully."

"Such desire
Was in my heart," she answered. "You have
guessed
What I had ventured not to ask!"

"Madonna,"
Gravely and fervently he said, "you ever
Need but command, I am your willing servant!"
And as she moved to rise, ere her slow maid
Had passed around her chair, for the perform-
ance

Of her small duties here, he stooped and took
The cushion from the floor, whereon her feet
Had rested while she sat, she chiding him
With a half timid smile,— "Nay, nay, Maestro,
I must not thus be served by such as you!"

So the gay group broke up, and passed from out
The chapel door, in knots of two and three,

Engaged in lively converse as before,
Some strolling at their ease near Angelo
And the Marchesa, others towards the city,
While slowly in the gold-flushed heavens above
The tints of sunset paled, and purple twilight
Crept over hill and dale.

“Surely, Maestro,
We meet again ere long! Come to me soon!”
She said to him at parting. Then at last
He took his leave, and bending o’er her hand,
Yet venturing not to press it to his lips,
He answered, “Aye, Madonna, surely soon!”
“In summer time I dwell not oft,” she said,
“Within the city, but a little way
Beyond the hills there,” pointing as she spoke,
“In the old cloister Santa Margherita,
And now return there for a few brief weeks,
Although the summer is nigh over, but
E’er gladly welcome such good friends as think
not
The way too far!”

Beneath the quiet stars
That one by one pierced glimmering through the
skies,
He took his silent path adown the hill
Back to his solitary home, the workshop,

Filled with a hundred images, creations
Of his e'er-teeming, never-resting brain,
In hundred forms and fashions. Some with scarce
The first conception sketched in few rough lines,
Others begun and well advanced, still others
Awaiting but the last fine master-strokes
Of his ne'er-failing chisel, — many traced
On loosely scattered sheets, some fully rounded
In soft, dark clay, a few carved boldly out
In fine-grained marble.

As his steps bent thither
His thought was but of her whose smile that
day
Had to his eye appeared more mild and beau-
teous
Than the most radiant star that shone above
him.

Ah, how was 't possible her lord could ever
Have left his fair young wife — aye, younger then,
But surely scarce more fair — to join the wars,
Following the banners of some foreign prince!
Well, mayhap it had been not vain ambition
And love of glory only, but the call
Of duty, stern, inexorable duty,
Merciless necessity! And a great sigh
Swelled Angelo's deep breast. The lord whom
she

Had loved with such a single-hearted passion,
And wept with such heart-broken agony ;
Had mourned so many years, with never-flagging,
Unwearying constancy, unto whose shade
She still was faithful, to whose memory
She sang those saddest, sweetest lays whose
breath

Bore through all lands the fame of her who craved
not

Or glory or applause ;—and dwelling on
Her golden hair, her eyes, her lips, her voice,
The unconscious, gentle play of her white hands,
On all the wondrous beauty of her presence, —
And musing more and more upon her kindness
And exquisite courtesy to him, — her greeting,
How she rose eagerly and took his hand,
And how 't was he alone she thus had hon-
ored, —

It seemed high honor in good truth, and grew
Most dear delight to think on. And the Mas-
ter,

Who was a welcome guest in court and palace,
Whose favor had been sued, whose friendship
sought

By prince and pope and king and cardinal,
Yet whose proud heart, disdaining their high state

And lesser worth, had never stirred nor fluttered,

Now felt all his whole soul within him thrilled
By a new joy and pride.

“Come to me soon!”

Had she not spoken thus to him at parting?
But yet what called she soon?—to-day? to-morrow?

What might not be too soon for courtesy?
To him it had not seemed too soon had he
Returned to her this very hour!

But when

With the new morn his daily labor claimed
All powers of thought, of head and hands once
more,

He, half ashamed — remembering his gray hair —
Of the impatient ardor filled him, put

Three days her image resolutely from him.

But on the fourth, closing the workshop early,
The heat of noon scarce past, he sallied forth
From out the gates, his face and heart set to-
wards

The village just behind the hills, that held
Blest Santa Margherita.

Easily gained he
Admittance here ; the stately portress drew

The bolt with gentle salutation, bidding
A sister, who that moment passed the door,
Lead him through the cool, quiet corridors
To the Marchesa's room. "'Tis scarce the hour
yet

When she receives her friends here, but I think
Her task is well-nigh done, and you may enter."
And the good nun withdrew. But, ere he
knocked,

Angelo paused a little on the threshold,
Feeding his eyes upon the beauteous picture
That met him through the open door.

She sat

Like a fair mother in her daughters' midst,
Or like that other name for constancy,
Penelope of old, thought Angelo,
Her lord's dear image ever in her heart,
Surrounded by young maidens, busily
Plying their needles, and bent o'er their work, —
Some fair enough, some plain, dark heads and
light,

All clad alike in simple, sober garb;
Poor girls, whom the good women of the convent
Brought up in charity, making them apt
At many useful arts, to send them forth
Into the world at last, where one, perchance,

Might find a happy lot, a humble home,
Another, mayhap, play for one brief hour,
In the gay turmoil of that wicked world,
A brilliant, dizzy part, then at the last
To wander back, a broken-hearted woman,
To the old cloister's sheltering arms. And while
She taught their fingers nimbleness and skill,
Wherewith to some time gain them honest bread,
She, who sat with them like a guardian angel,
Nourished their souls with high and holy thought,
Talking with them of God and hope of heaven,
The Virgin and the Saviour; fortified
Their young, hot, timid hearts with noble tales
Of great heroic faith, and constant courage,
Of steadfast, sore-tried virtue, triumphing
O'er all temptation's evils. Now she was
Relating in her low, melodious voice,
To them that listened breathless, with their needles

Sometimes suspended idly for an instant,
The story of St. Margaret, patroness
Of their own cloister, who, but armed with her
Sweet innocence, had vanquished the fell dragon.
The teller's own hands busily employed
Upon a rich and beauteous altar cloth,
Whereon her skillful needle and her maid's

Were deftly twining long, luxuriant garlands
Of silken roses and white lilies, round
A Holy Mother and her Blessed Babe, —
Until she suddenly cut short her story
And raised her eyes, as Angelo at length
Tapped gently at the door.

“Come in!” she said,
And as he entered, “Ah, Maestro, you!”
And rose to meet and greet him as before.
“A thousand welcomes! How most amiable
And kind to come so soon! Pray pardon me
For but a moment more, and I have done
here!”

And bidding him be seated by the window,
Through which the air came cool and sweet,
herself

Returned among her maidens, — who, perceiving
A stranger enter, had glanced swiftly up,
And now sat, some with blushing cheeks, and
eyes

Bent meekly on their work again, a few
Half coyly eying him through long, dark lashes, —
Took up her needle yet once more, but left
Her tale unfinished then.

“So soon!” she said,
So soon! — to her the days that parted them

Had then flown fast enough,—the hours that
were

To him a weary time of endless waiting,
Been counted not by her impatient heart!
Aye, how unmoved she was, how calm, while yet
His hand half shook from the warm clasp of
hers!—

So soon, in truth!—and peevishly repeating
Her words to him, it seemed a sudden shadow
Fell o'er the fleck of sunlight on the floor,
A fretful discontent, a swift displeasure,
A sense of wrath well-nigh with her, invading
His turbulent soul, so finely strung and tem-
pered,
Oft but a faint breath jarred it.

And he turned
His darkened eyes from her who ever drew
them,

And suffered them to wander round the room,—
A lofty chamber with a tinted ceiling,
The walls lined everywhere with dark brown
wood

Preciously carved, and hung with many a treas-
ure

Of art and beauty. In one sacred corner
The image of the Saviour on the Cross,

And at its foot a cushion ; — here, past doubt,
She made her daily prayers. Near it a shelf
Filled with old, learned volumes, and a seat
Whereon she rested sometimes, where lay now
A lute and a small open book of music.
Here, too, a great stained window, through whose
panes
Fell mellow tints upon the wall beyond,
Save where, thrown widely open, it admitted
The breeze and the white light, half checkered by
The shadow of the climbing vine outside,
And playing o'er the table. Here lay scattered
Loose sheets of paper, some half filled with writ-
ing,
And letters, near her pen. Among them stood
Three noble lilies in a tall, white glass
Slender as their own stems, and a wide urn
Of curious workmanship in fretted silver,
Heaped with gold oranges and swelling bunches
Of white and pale-red grapes, whose delicate sub-
stance
Let half the sunlight through. O'er all things
spread
The exquisite bloom, the charm ineffable,
Lent by a woman's touch. And Angelo,
Even as he fastened on her face again

The gaze that could not long be absent thence,
Sighed heavily once more.

“Now, my good children
Go for to-day! Be diligent at work
And earnest at your prayers, until to-morrow
You come to me again!” she said, and rose,
And ere the girls took leave with a low courtesy,
Each one drew near and pressed her timid lips
Upon her outstretched hand, while Angelo,
With a contracted brow and hungry eyes,
Jealously watched them.

But when they had gone,
The maid too vanishing, left them alone,
And now Vittoria, with her grave, sweet smile
Turned back to him, and drew her chair near
his ;

The gloomy frown unbent, all his ill temper,
Already half dispelled, melted away,
And when she said again, “In truth, Maestro,
It was most kind in you to come to-day!
Know you that I have heard you sadly slandered ?

Even by such friends as say they know you
well,

Who painted you to me as one who loves

To dwell apart, withdrawn unto himself,
And ever shunning company ; and now
How pleasantly am I deceived ! ” — he answered
With a grim smile, “ As one you ’d say, Ma-
donna,
Given to black, sullen moods and bursts of tem-
per,
Morose and fierce, — a most unamiable,
Harsh, crabbed old fellow ! Aye, I know such is
The pretty name I go by ! But, Madonna,
Saw you e’er clouds, however dark, the sun
Could gild not with his light ? ”

So they sat long

Conversing upon many things ; talked of
His native city, of his youth, his art,
Of the great statue in the public place,
The marvelous tombs, the ceiling of the chapel,
Where he in hundred images immortal
Had painted the beginning and the end,
The first creation and the last dread day
Of this small, fleeting world. Of many of
The godly monuments that should attest
His heaven-born power e’en to the latest ages.
Talked freely like old friends, without reserve,
As though long years they ’d daily met, accus-
tomed

To read each other's hearts ; Angelo's soul
Unfolding 'neath her influence benign,
Opening its deepest life, revealing its
Most secret thought to her, as never yet
He had to other mortal, while Vittoria,
With delicate womanly tact and modesty,
Held back her own, stood half aloof in shadow,
Save where in tender sympathy her spirit
Reached forward to his own.

Thus sped the hours
Until the light waned, and a clear, soft bell
Rang out above them. "It is vespers," said
she,

And bent her head as in mute prayer an instant
A look of rapt devotion in her face.

And as he gazed on her, she seemed to him
The very spirit of that holy place.

Aye, there was something of soft, tinted lights,
Of solemn organ strains and sacred songs,
In all her life and soul !

But as he moved not,
When now the bell had ceased, and shortly after
Sweet, distant voices rose upon the air,
She said again, "The chanting has begun ;
I should be there, — come with me to the chapel !"
But he, arising, "No, I must away, —

Pardon, Madonna, if I stayed too late,
'Tis a hard task to leave you!"

"Come again,"

She answered simply; "whensoe'er you please
To do me honor, Master, you will ever
Be dear and welcome to me."

"When I please!

Ah, I much fear you know not what you say,
What you would bring upon yourself, Madonna,
If I should take you at your word!" And nigh
Had added, — Then should I rest here forever,
Stir from this spot no more while I have breath!
"How often and how soon," — forgetting all
The sting that word had given, — "I'll come
again!

Yet thank you for your passing courtesy.
But will you be alone? I like it not
To find a court about you! Friendship, even
Like love, is but a jealous god, and I
Am bold, Madonna, and exacting, claim
All favors for myself!"

"Yes, near this hour,
It is but rare that other friends are with me."
"And if I, too, be good and diligent" —
He asked, clasping the hand she put in his —
"Until we meet again, will you grant me
The same reward those maidens took?"

And she
Said, with her sweet, faint flush and smile, "You,
Master,
Are ever so most diligent, you may
All times take what reward you please!"

So with
His fervent lips pressed to her hand, he left her
Without another word.

He came again,
Full soon and oft, as he had prophesied,
Came every day at length, passing all freely
Both in and out her dwelling when it pleased
him,
At morn, or noon, or eve; until the hour
That brought him sight of her to feast on, grew
The one bright, luminous point in all his day,
However dark and toilsome all the rest, —
The central sun round which his heart revolved,
Reached forward to eagerly, as a blossom
Turns to the light, waxing itself more radiant
As so it turned; until her blessed presence,
Seemed more than bread, was as the wine of life
Unto his thirsting soul, — a need so great
That were it suddenly cut off, he fancied
He surely must have perished.

Her he found
Ever the same, serene and kind and courteous,
Sweet in that gentle dignity and peace
That sat so well on her, and that no cloud
Seemed to have power to dim or trouble more,
Secure forever from earth's pangs and tempests
His eye but rarely tracing a faint shade
Of sadness on her brow. She gradually
Warming to deeper confidence with him,
Revealing him her heart in turn, perceiving
His soul was aye an open book before her.
He saw her oftenest clad in sombre robes
Like that in which he first beheld her, some-
times

Varied by pearly gray or spotless white,
Wherein she looked to his enraptured eye
Like a sweet bride, — but like a bride of Heaven
More than of earth! was his swift, grievous
thought, —

And ever with the fine, dark veil dimming
The lustre of her golden hair, shading
The beauteous lines of head and face and throat,
And with the rosary, yet now and then
A cluster of fresh, fragrant violets,
A golden-hearted lily, or pale rose
Upon her bosom, Angelo e'er gazing

With passionate, jealous yearning at the flowers
Resting so near her heart.

Thus passed the autumn,
And melted into winter, till that greened
And blossomed into spring again and summer,
And that too vanished, and gave way once more
To other autumn fading in its turn.

Thus many seasons glided swiftly by,
How many, Angelo told not. It seemed
That he had known her from the world's begin-
ning,

How he had lived before, long years without her,
Scarce comprehending now, time ever deepening
The spell upon his soul ; glided by swiftly,
Amid a thousand schemes and giant labors,
And daily visits to Vittoria, made
Sometimes again in Santa Margherita,
And sometimes in the chapel on the hill ;
More oft in her own dwelling in the city,
Where, through the winter and the early spring,
She dwelt, in easier reach, — although what road
Had seemed too long, too hot and wearisome,
So it but led to her ! On those rare days,
Dark ones to him and barren, when by some
Ill chance, some cruel circumstance unlooked for,
Some overpress of work, he could not come,

He sent her messages and letters, sometimes
The breathing, burning words that in his soul
When he dwelled far from her, fashioned them-
selves

Into melodious rhyme. She suffering gravely
And silently, rejecting not, nor yet
Fairly accepting, by a look or word,
The homage, the deep, passionate devotion,
He, careless of concealment, lavishly
Poured at her feet, only refusing ever
To read in the hot flame wherewith his eye
Sometimes lit up, more than most ardent friend-
ship.

And once she wrote to him, "If you, my friend,
Send me so many letters, pray do they
Not make you tardy at your morning's work?
Myself, I know, they more than once delayed
From early mass, for when they come I cannot
But stop and read." And he, bowing his head,
Submissively received the gentle hint
So delicately tempered by fine flattery,
And wrote no more so often.

He was with her
Late one long afternoon in early spring,
While she yet tarried in her stately mansion.
The day had been full warm, and the skies dark-
ened

With rain that fell not, only now, towards eve,
A tardy sunshine lit the brightening heavens,
A fresher breath stirred the reviving air.
The windows of the chamber where they sat
That overlooked the river in the distance,
Were thrown wide open on the broad veranda,
O'er whose checked marble floor there flickered
now

The timid shadows of the fresh, young leaves
But just kissed into life by the warm sunbeams,
And making green the stout old vine that wound
Its arms about the pillars. The faint breeze
That drifted by them wafted now and then
To Angelo the odor of the violets
Upon Vittoria's bosom.

“Aye, Madonna,”

He said, breaking a pause, in moody tones,
For not e'en she had power to exorcise,
Always and wholly, the dark, haunting spirits
That often swift and unaccountably
Beset his soul, “As we advance in life,
As we grow old, — and think how many years
Have passed o'er this head! — full three-score
and over,
Sixty long winters! — there steals on us some-
times,

A sense of waning power and weariness!
Aye, one grows weary of all things at last,
Unutterably weary unto death!"

He cried more loud, flinging his arms aloft
With a great, powerful gesture, that but ill
Chimed in with his lamenting words: "Weary" —
He went on fiercely, heeding not this time
The gentle voice that would have interposed —
"Of peace and storms, of triumph and defeat,
Success and failure, praise and blame and glory,
Labor and struggle and unceasing effort,
Of all the fevered heart and brain conceive,
Of strength itself and everlasting courage,
Unnerved even for the very task itself —
Oh, the most difficult task! — of living, breathing,
Moving our hands and feet! And looking back,
It seems to me there is no day, no hour
In all my past, wherein I battled not,
Wrestled not fiercely with myself or others,
With hostile fate and circumstance, — fought not
My ground, hewed not my path, even inch by
 inch,
Through thousand difficulties, pains, and perils,
Bleeding at countless wounds! My youth em-
 bittered
By petty jealousies and enmities,

Wranglings and scoffs of those that envied me
What power God gave me, and what more I
gained

By hot, unceasing labor. In my manhood
My country's fall and ruin and disgrace,
My native town foully betrayed into
Her cursed foe's red hand! Oh, such a blow
Is never quite lived down. It is a wound
That rankles on forever, seems to sap
The very root of life!" And a great anguish
Rang in his deep-toned voice.

"Nay, friend," she said,
When now he paused, "if the good God, who has
Exalted you above so many thousands,—
And does not all our fair, wide land, not only
The noble city of your birth, claim you
For her great son, her joy and pride!—saw fit
To send you sharper pangs than to us others,
'T is for He made you greater than us all,
Cast your soul in some higher, godlier mould
Than that wherein he fashioned other mortals!
And surely for all bitterness you speak of,
There has been sweetness also, in your life,
And bliss diviner than was ever given
To us poor children of the earth to know.
You have scaled heights where our more feeble
feet

Can follow not, drunk deep of ecstasies
We scarce have tasted. In your giant spirit
Both pain and joy alike tower far above
The measure of our common understanding,
To heights that make the curse, perchance, and
yet

The greatness of your life, — nay, but which are
That very life itself! And in those hours
Of weariness," she said again, when he
Made yet no answer to her words, — "my friend,
Believe they come to all of us! — can you
Not think of Him, our shining, great example
In patience and long-suffering, — Him who toiled
Bowed 'neath the aching burden of His cross
Up the steep hill, and fainted by the road-side,
To ever rise again, and yet toil onward
Until the top was gained?"

He still stood silent
And doubtful if he heard her, with his brow
Bent frowning on the ground in gloomy revery.
She gently laid her hand upon his arm
Now hanging listlessly.

That touch aroused him,
And turning on her eyes still sullen, yet
In softer tone, he said, "Ah, but forgive me,
Vittoria! You who bear so generously

With all my churlish moods and freaks, — so
foreign

To what your even life, your soul serene
Have ever known, you scarce may comprehend
them!

Wherefore talk I to you of age! On you
Time left no scars!”

“Nay, you forget, Maestro,” —
Half smiling as she spoke, too glad to lead him
From the dark depths back to more shallow
waters, —

“I, too, have seen full two-score years and over!”
“But they were sunny summers!”

“Nay, my friend,” —
And all her smile had vanished, — “my life, too,
Has known its chilly winters and fierce storms!”
She paused an instant, then, — “And what you
say

Of that still sense of waning strength, — though
surely

The power of your green years is still unbroken,
You will make glad the world with many more
Immortal works! — that sense we women own
In the perception that with time there fades,
Though we would bid it stay, all that in young
days

Once made us fair, perchance!”

“Your passing beauties” —

He answered; and from out the eyes resting
Upon her with a dreamy gaze all darkness
Melted away, until they well-nigh smiled —
“Heaven is but gradually and one by one
Recalling to Himself, to clothe therewith
Some other human soul, so they may not
Be wholly lost to this sad earth. Even as
He gathers up my sighs and prayers and tears
To give to him who then shall worship her
As I do you, and happier far than I,
Have power, mayhap, with all the pains endured,
To move her heart, as I could ne’er move
yours!”

Her eye fell, but she answered not. And he,
After a moment’s silence, sighing heavily,
Thrown back on his old thoughts, all the black
shadows
Deepening once more about him, said again, —
“Aye, there is not a year whose memory hangs
not
Like a dead weight upon my soul! But yet
Our sense grows callous, too, and dulled; and
thus
The edge is taken off all things, darkness

And light alike! Our heart's most generous
fires

Languish and die; our soaring thought falls flat;
Hope turns to vain despair and joy to anguish;
Fond dreams and prayers melt into empty air;
Yearning consumes itself, eats its own heart;
The tenderest chords are rudely jarred and
broken

So many countless, maddening times, at last
The sickened soul, — for it is here" (striking
His hand upon his heart) "that we are pierced
Unto the life! — chilled and repulsed so often,
Rolled back to feed upon itself alone,
That rushed out joyful to embrace the world, —
Stabbed by a thousand disappointments, pricked by
Unnumbered smarting stings and needle-points,
Starved into grim indifference, its own self
Grows cold and hard, learns to accept unquestioning

The bitter stone of resignation for
Its natural, daily bread, — scarce ventures more
To spread poor, stunted wings, that life has
clipped

So closely that they bleed, wherewith to flutter
Even towards the smallest hope! And yet some
things,"

He fiercely cried, and clinched his hands together,

With one consuming, flaming glance at her, —

“Some hopes we cannot, will not, yield e’en then,
Surrender not life itself!—it seems

That we must wrest from Fate, and be it from
Her deepest, merciless heart!”

The swift faint flush

That kindled ’neath his eye, and slowly spread
O’er brow and cheek and neck, showed him how
well

She understood, but yet she said full calmly,

“From Fate, perchance, my friend, but not from
God!

In those old, far-off days, when even as now
God dwelt beyond the stars, but for some cause
Inscrutable unto our feeble sight

Had never made his presence manifest,
Revealed Himself to men,—the days when gods
Lived on Olympus, and below here peopled
The woods and rivers, mingling freely in

The human joys and sorrows of the mortals
From out whose brain they sprang,—then men
perchance,

Might talk of Fate and wresting from her grasp
What she denied. But, Angelo, for us

Who are so favored by his signal mercy,
Us who have looked upon the face of God,
It is not thus to speak!"

"The face of God,
The face of God!" he muttered. "Aye, but e'en
The face of God itself is dimmed and blurred
By all the tears and clouds and blinding smoke
Of petty earth-fires, rolled 'twixt us and it,
Till in the troubled currents of our lives
Our groping sight half loses it,—all radiance
Is well-nigh blotted out!"

But she this time
Scarce heard the murmured words, for she had
risen,
And passing to the chamber's other end
Took from a casket, curiously inlaid,
Some leaves of paper; then returning, asked,
"Pray, Angelo, would you have patience now
To listen to such lines as I last wrote,
Lend me your ear and mind a little, kindly
Give me your judgment? They have not been
heard yet
By other friends!"

And reading in his eye
His too glad willingness, even had he not,
Suddenly subdued, cried out, "Ah, yes, Madonna,

How can you question, 't is a joy and honor!"
She bidding him sit near her, read to him.

Read in her low, clear voice that quivered not,
A lay of love and praise, a plaint of pain
For the departed, at whose tomb her soul
Kept ceaseless watch, and all her heart's affec-
tions

Burned like a lamp eternal, night and day, —
A passionate outpouring of the founts
Of deepest tenderness and grief, in words
So full of music, on her lips they seemed
Soft as the murmur of that shady brook,
Sad as the warble of that nightingale,
Sweet as the breath of that fair, sun-kissed rose
Whereof she sang, and yet wherefrom all glory
Had parted with his vanishing. A song
Through all whose tearful sadness there yet shone
A mild, unshaken star, the faith sublime
That ever pointed upward, a great trust
In Him who doeth all things well.

"My friend,
What say you?" she asked, gently, after ending,
As he sat long in silence.

"O Vittoria,
What would you have me say!" he cried. "It is

The sweetest strain ever made glad these ears,
And the most bitter ever pierced this soul!
But would I, too, had faith like yours! Yet for
You women, who ne'er mingle as we must
In the fierce conflicts of the evil world,
Whose souls are of more even, peaceful temper,
'Tis easy to have faith!"

"Think you in truth,
It was so easy ever?" And in her
Deep earnestness she laid unconsciously
Her hand on his once more, and though his own
Hungered to clasp it round and hold it close,
Fearful she might withdraw it, he moved not
A finger, ventured scarce to breathe.

"Believe you,
The rock of faith, where now I trust my soul
Has built her mansion indestructible,
Was gained without much weary toil, without
Much difficult ascent, and bleeding feet?
The calm that you perchance see with me now
Was never rent by tempests,—was not found
Beyond most troubled, storm-tossed seas? O
friend,

Then have you read my heart but ill!"

And slowly
Drawing her hand away and leaning back •

With a deep sigh, her eyes gazing far off
Into some dreamy distance now, her soul
Borne on the current of her own sweet song
Back to the bright shores of the golden past,
She said again, —

“Our parents had betrothed us
In early infancy, but as he grew
To man’s estate, and I to womanhood,
Our hearts confirming the long bond, knew well
Of all the wide world we could ne’er have loved
But one another; and in the fresh springtime
Of both our lives — only our love had turned
E’en latest days to spring — we two were wed.
Oh, have you ever loved, in youthful years,” —
And nigh forgetting who it was that heard her
There quivered in her rising voice a thrill
Of deepest passion, — “in glad, youthful years,
When joy and hope were young and fair and
 radiant,
When the swift blood bounded through every vein,
Each breath, each pulse of eager, throbbing life,
Was sweetest bliss, unspeakable delight,
All the earth flooded, as your heart, with sun-
 shine, —
Oh, loved you ever, with each glowing sense,
Each burning fibre of your soul?” —

“Madonna!”

He cried out suddenly ; as one in anguish,
Whose lips will keep the stifled groan no longer,
That must burst forth at last, — “Madonna, spare
me!”

And laid one trembling hand upon her chair,
For with her face turned from him, she had not
Perceived how as she spoke his spirit struggled
With a great, dark despair, that all in vain
The working brow strove to conceal, and now
But swiftly glancing round, she said more calmly,
“Forgive me, Angelo! I would but pray you
Remember all the passion of your youth,
If you would know what was our love!” And
then,

Her voice soon sinking to its wonted peace,
Went on, —

“The first few blissful years we dwelt
Upon a beauteous island in the sea,
Near that blue, smiling bay and dark volcano,
So famed among the glories of our land,
The untold happiness of all our days
Undimmed by any faintest shadow, save
That Heaven pleased not to hear our ardent
prayers
To grant us a sweet child. Then came the day

When called on by the prince — a stranger, too,
Yet who espoused our much-loved country's
cause —

To join his arms against the foreign foe
Whose desecrating hands were laying waste
Our blooming fields: he went from me, and I,
What though the souls of both of us were wrung
At parting thus, perceiving his high duty
And mine full clearly, sought not to detain him,
But rather cheered him on.

“And years succeeded,
Long years when he dwelt far from me, but
rarely,

And for but few, sweet days returning home,
When oft my lonely, anxious nights were spent
In tearful prayer, beseeching Heaven to spare
him,

Preserve him safe 'mid all the thousand perils
That ever hedged him round. And then the
hour

That brought me news of a great battle fought,
And from himself the message he was wounded
Unto the death, he feared, and bid me haste
To come to him in the great city north
Where he had halted. With my breathless soul
Hung trembling, thrilled by hope and doubt and
fear,

I flew to him, pausing nor night, nor day.
Could I have called the lightnings or the storm-
winds

To serve and bear me on, they yet had been
Too slow for my impatience. But half way
A messenger in mourning met me, saying
It was too late, — that he had died, my name
The last sigh on his lips. Ah, Angelo,
If hearts could break in one great agony,
Then mine had burst as I hung over him,
In wild despair clung to the lifeless form
That could no longer answer, hear no more
All the sweet names I called him with mad
tears, —

The sinful heart which in that hour rose up
In rank rebellion against God, and His
Most wise and just and merciful decrees.

“How I survived I know not. For long years,
Broken in spirit, dead to every hope,
I dwelt within a cloister, half resolved
To take the veil, and while I lived to leave
Those sheltering walls no more: till, searching
closely,
With anxious care and scrutiny, my heart,
I found it not yet fitted for such high

And saintly state, my soul not perfectly
Surrendered unto God alone, not wholly
Won from all joys and beauties of the earth;
Till time had laid her soothing, healing hand
Upon the quivering wound and closed it; till
The dawn broke slowly, when my Saviour shed
The light of His blessed countenance divine
Into my darkened soul, with passing mercy,
Till I knew joy again, and peace eternal,
When I found Him!"

And with a rapid motion,
Wherein, unknown to her, leaped forth once
more

The smouldering fire and fervor of her soul,
She clasped the rosary and kissed the cross,
With passionate, clinging lips.

Oh for one instant
To be that carved, unconscious image there!
Was the wild wish that flashed through Angelo's
Hot, jealous heart. And then the afterthought,—
Oh what a mad, vain, and presumptuous fool
Were he who would bear home this holy life,
That like a steady, upward-spiring torch,
Burns at the altar of the Most High God,
To be the fire on his domestic hearth!—
Impossible conceit!

And swift regretful

Of his irreverence, bowing his head
Upon the hand he gently took in his,
And that resisted not, now drooping idly
Upon her lap, the other one brief moment
Covering his eyes, he said, — and now his voice
Was low and deep, —

“I thank you! O Vittoria,
Who did in truth win an immortal victory,
Who triumphed over life, and conquered death,
Teach me such faith as yours! The trust sub-
lime

That is as oil upon the troubled waters!
Aye, I have hungered, thirsted, blindly wrestled
For peace like yours full many a day in vain.
In the dark hours when all the maddening spec-
tres

Of the sore past arise, when I remember
All I have suffered and shall suffer yet,
The slumbering poison in the blood awakes,
My stubborn heart groans 'neath its galling bur-
den,

Forgets, denies its God! I stand before you
Loaded with years, and bowed with weight of
sin,

The taint of many ills upon my soul!

You see me a repentant sinner! Take me,
And mould and fashion all my heart anew.
Reject me not! let me be your disciple,
Help me, guide me, Madonna! Show my feet,
That plod through stony valleys filled with shadows,
To scale the sunny heights yours long have
gained;
From you I could accept and learn, methinks,
That which naught else beneath God's far-off
heavens
Could ever teach me!"

She drew softly from him

The hand that rested in his clasp till now,
And for one instant, as though blessing him,
Laid her white fingers, lightly as a breath,—
And yet the touch thrilled through his veins like
fire,—

Upon his brow, uplifted to her face
With a new fervor radiant in his eyes;—
Then, a faint tremor in her voice, she said,
"I will endeavor, Angelo! What help
My feeble power, what help a fellow mortal
Can give you, shall be yours with all my soul.
But, friend, salvation such as this, through slow
And painful travail mayhap, is yet born

From our own deepest consciousness alone.
And that within your inmost heart there lives
Even now a faith like that whereof you speak,
Strong, great, unquenchable, I am well sure.
Nay, Angelo, shake not your head! I know it!
He who was blessed with such high, godly gifts
As unto you were granted, surely bows
With every breath he draws, mutely before
The Power who gave them, every hour of life
Acknowledges, if half unconsciously,
The Godhead, the last, absolute Perfection,
That never failing feeds his inspiration,
Whereof each aspiration of his soul
Is but a part,—the soul that dwells forever
Close to the heart of God! Pray draw me some
time

An image of the Lord!—Christ the Redeemer
Upon the tree suffering His earthly anguish,
And in those godly features let me read
My fond conviction true! Will you, my friend?"

"Perchance, Madonna! Aye, some time, I will,
Some time,—but I may say not, know not
when!"

He murmured, stooping to pick up a violet
Had slipped from out her bosom to his feet.

And so, her hand pressed to his lips and heart,
They parted for the day.

The next and next
For three long days, the sultry air yet brooded
Heavy with undue heat above the earth,
Till that nigh groaned. Fierce summer, it appeared,
Had leaped with one bold bound into his throne,
Ere yet his time was come. The fiery sun
Sent scorching arrows down from blazing skies,
Till the o'ercharged, hot heart of heaven at
length
Burst in a gush of tears, and the wild rain
Swept down in wind-lashed torrents. For long
hours
The tempest shook and tossed and madly fretted
The trembling, bending shrubs and sighing trees,
Flowering in the first tender green of spring,
And loudly piping drove against the panes.
Then fell a pause, too swift and suddenly
To long endure: and still dark, fitful clouds
Flew shifting through the murky skies; but in
That momentary hush came Angelo.
Yet to his soul, wherefrom she fondly fancied
The shadows for a little time had fled,

The breaking storm, that seemed to roll a weight
From every heart, had brought no calm. Vitoria

Well knew it at the first swift glance, long
skilled

In reading on that face each faintest shade.
He would not seat himself, but moved about
Uneasily here and there, said naught, and made
But short and broken answers to such questions
As she in all her wonted grave, sweet manner
Would ask from time to time. Until at length,
Wearied with such bleak converse, and perchance
Catching from him some spirit of unrest,
She said, "Methinks 't is warm here and oppressive!"

And rising threw the window widely open.

"Ah yes," as she gazed up into the skies,

"The storm is not yet over, — heaven not yet
Has emptied all his floods! there in the east
Another tempest brews, but till it burst

Come, Angelo, let us out here upon

The balcony; the air is cool and pleasant

After the rain. But oh, how it has raged!"

For all the floor lay strewn with bright young
leaves

The merciless wind had torn from off their vine
And scattered there.

Mutely he followed her,
And while she sat where she could see the river,
Half veiled in vapory mist, he with his arms
Crossed on his breast, stood by in moody silence
Leaning against the pillar nearest her.
At length, bending upon her strange, dark eyes,
Whose meaning this time she could fathom not,
He said, in husky tones, once more resuming
Their last discourse, as though no space divided
That hour from this, —

“And ’t is the sorest ill
That years and suffering on our souls inflict,
That they rob conscious life of all delight,
Existence of all rapture, — that the thrill
Of ecstasy must perish. Oh, how shortlived
That golden dream of early youth and childhood,
Which sees the earth in thousand rainbow tints,
A shimmering, witching, wondrous fairy-land,
Where all things great and fair are possible,
Spread in its charmèd sight! How soon it fades
Into dim distance hopelessly, that naught,
No yearning and no tearful turning back,
Can e’er bring back again, — the spell is broken
The bright enchantment fled! How soon we
learn
How cold and bleak and barren is the world,

How stripped of all sweet bloom and tender
grace,

How filled with chill, hard, merciless facts alone,
'Gainst which we strike our feet and break our
hearts

At every step; whereon each fond delusion
Is shivered like a bauble on a stone;
A dreary waste where naught is possible
Of great and fair, save what ourselves achieve
With aching strain of every nerve and fibre!"

He scarcely paused, then said again, his breast
Heaved with swift-flying breath, his voice, sub-
dued first,

Swelled gradually with deep and deeper pas-
sion, —

"But one thing can restore the broken spell,
A tardy recompense in later years
For all lost ecstasies, — and when we find it,
Shall we not love it, strain it to our hearts,
Our bleeding hearts, to hold it there forever,
A joy eternal, — plant the shining lily
In our poor patch of withered desert land?
Madonna!" cried he, while she gazed at him,
A shade of anxious, deepening trouble darkening
Her quiet eyes, — "Madonna, you are she,

Who in the wintry autumn of my years,
Now, at the hour when other men look forward
But to the grave, have burst on my dark life
A starry, singing, flowering spring, — brought
back

My youth to me and gladness, nay, a youth
More joyous than I ever knew!—beneath
Whose magic touch the sunken fairy-land
Arose once more in all its ancient splendor!
Aye, life is beautiful and earth is fair,
Lies bathed in golden sunlight at my feet,
Since I knew you, loved you! Nay, suffer me
To tell you so but once!” he fiercely pleaded,
As she rose swiftly up and stood before him
One trembling hand outstretched and face averted.
“But once to speak in words what yet no words
Can ever tell, but what has surely long
Been known to you from thousand silent signs,
And more than once well-nigh o’erflowed in
words!

Nay, I will speak!” he cried, as her lips moved
“For once relieve this bursting heart of what
Was here locked up so long”—striking his
breast

With his clinched hand—“that it has grown a
galling,

Intolerable burden! I must speak
This once at every cost, and you must hear me,
Though you should banish me from out your sight
Forever after this! I know my cause
Is hopeless, hopeless as though I should stretch
These hungry arms to clasp the sun above us!"
And yet, perceiving her lips blanched and quivering,

He suddenly asked, his voice like a great cry,
"Yet *is* it utterly without all hope,
Madonna, *is* it so?"

And now, but for
She threw out both her hands to hinder him, —
Hands she felt seized, covered with burning
kisses, —
He would have bent a knee.

"Nay, Angelo! —

Nay, for the love of God, I do conjure,
I pray, I do beseech you! — hush! — no more!"
She whispered breathless over him. "And look,
We are no more alone!" — glancing to where
Marietta stood within the open window,
Her little maid, holding her lute, who not
Suspecting aught, had entered noiselessly
To seek her mistress, but perceiving now
Her lady's eyes on her, turned swiftly back,

And would have gone, but that she called to her
“Nay, come, my child! Stay, I have need of
you!”

“Pardon; I fancied you alone, Madonna!”
She said, advancing shyly. And Vittoria,
Now fully facing her, with lips still white,
But firm, clear voice, “No, Messer Angelo
You see is with me. Messer Angelo,
Who just as you came in saw a black wasp
Alighting near my foot, and so stooped down
To kindly free me from it!”

He had turned,
And like a sullen lion kept at bay,
Resolved in stubborn fierceness not to yield,
But hold his ground before such petty foe,—
Retreated to the pillar, where he leaned,
His arms thrown backward closely clasping it,
His head bowed low upon his breast. A martyr
Bound to his torturing stake! was the swift image
Passed through Vittoria’s soul, as hastily once
She glanced at him. Surely no martyr’s face,
Who saw the cruel flames creep close and closer
Was ever darker and more rent with anguish
Than his knit, stormful brow, his stern-set lips,
His shadowed, burning eyes, so fierce, it seemed

That lurid lightnings brooded in their depths,
As fitfully they darted o'er the forms
Of the two women near him.

“Did you come
To sing to me, my child?” Vittoria asked.
“You have your lute, I see. Ah, that is well!
I shall be most content to listen now
To some sweet strain. And Messer Angelo
Will surely pardon, if it please him not!”

“Yes, I would sing you the last song, Madonna,
They sent me from my country, my sweet France;
They sing it there at court. I have just learned
it,
And fancy it will please you.”

And not waiting
For more than a mute sign, while her bright
eyes,
Lit with a glance of swift intelligence,
Glided o'er both, she touched her lute and sang:—

“Nay! pray the gods, my friend,
They never 'twixt us send
The lurid flame of love.
The flaring, restless fire
Of passionate desire
That brings but tears and pain!

Grant we may e'er remain
In this calm, golden sunshine of the heart,
Content to meet or part,
As the glad day and kindly fate ordain !

“For wherefore wed, my friend,
When now our two lives blend
So full and perfectly?
Perchance, yet closer bound,
Souls that together sound
Now so harmoniously,
Jarred and discordant grew,
Each other's company,
Sweet now and ever new,
Tasted unceasingly,
Stale as a twice-told tale !

“I counted it not gain,
But rather grievous loss and bitter pain,
Friendship's dear joys were done,
And love's delights begun;
A true friend lost me and a lover won!
Nay, I do swear to thee,
As God loves thee and me.
'T were thousand pities and must never be !”

Vittoria had drawn from him, and so turned
That Angelo scarce saw her outlined face,
Closing her eyes as she lay back to listen,

The delicate color slowly surging back
To pallid lips and cheek, though still Marietta,
Seated upon a low stool near her feet,
Thought, even 'mid her singing, never yet
Had been her lady's face so lily white.
And while she sat and heard, her ear and fancy
Touched lightly by the careless words, that set
Deftly to some sweet tune, rippled and skipped
From off Marietta's pretty lips, like to
The warbling of a bright-hued bird, something
Like a half smile hovered for one brief instant
About her lips, to find how strangely well
The airy song chimed with the heavy mood
That stifling hung upon their souls, how deeply,
Though but with shallow, earthly chords, struck in
With the most subtle strings, the finest fibres,
So painfully vibrating this dark hour
Faint like a shadow as the smile had been,
His jealous eye had seen it, and but ill
Catching the meaning of the foreign tongue,
He grimly asked, "You smile! what say those
words?"
"A sparkling, gay French song," — she answered.
turning
Her head half towards him, but their eyes met
not, —

“Of friends, who would not wed!”—then to
Marietta,

“A pleasing, pretty thing, in truth, my child,
And you have learned it well, and sung it sweet-
ly,—

Kind thanks for all your pains!”

But Angelo,
Who had drawn swiftly near, now bending o’er
her,

Whispered in fevered breath close to her ear,—
“A vile French song this hour, and you can
smile!

You see me perish in your sight and smile!”
Then violently broke and vanished
Ere she could turn to him.

She made no sign
By word or look, to hold or call him back.
But with a heavy sigh clasped both her hands
Before her face, and thus sat motionless
And silent long. All an eternity,
Marietta thought, who stayed, yet ventured not
To breathe a word. And looking up at length
She found her little maid’s eyes fixed on her
With troubled gaze. “How! you still here, my
child?”

She said all gently, yet her voice was strange,—

Then, with a motion of her hand, "Go, now;
Leave me, my daughter, I would be alone!"
And gathering up her lute, giving no utterance
To the swift question rising to her lips,
If there were aught that she could do, Marietta
Obeyed her lady's bidding.

He was gone, —
His face, his voice, his eyes no longer there;
But yet it seemed as though his unseen presence,
His passionate soul, burst from its earthly fet-
ters,
Still lingered, hovered near, clung close to her,
As though, departing, he had left behind him
All his own fitful, feverish, wild unrest.
His kisses on her hand burned on and on,
What though again and yet again she clasped
Each with the other, that was chill as death,
Till a fine stream of sharp, consuming fire
Coursed through each vein, her quiet pulses flew,
A great, unwonted tumult stirred and lashed
All the calm, even currents of her blood
Into a whirling storm.

With swift impatience
She rose and pushed her chair away, and hastily
Strode long time up and down the wide veranda,
How long she knew not, with untiring steps, —

Her veil e'er following her like a dark mist,
Until she caught and held it fast about her, —
Until at length, wearied but yet uncalmed,
She sank into her seat once more.

Sat there

Alone upon the darkening balcony,
Her throbbing head supported on her hand,
Heedless of, seeing not, the lurid sunset
That for an instant shed its glory round her,
The dim, swift, deepening twilight, and the
shades

Of the wild night, that fell, — till a pale moon
That struggled painfully through flying clouds,
Poured out a feeble light upon the floor,
Oft dimmed and swallowed by black shadows ;
felt not

The chilly breath of the damp wind, that drove
The coming storm invisibly before him, —
Felt naught, nor heard, nor saw, her inward
gaze

Intently searching her own soul.

Was it

Then possible, oh, possible, my God! —
That she might yield to his mad prayers? His
words,

“Yet *is* it utterly without all hope?”

Rung ever in her ears, and she remembered
With what intense, fond, clinging sympathy,
What deep affection, all her being oft
Yearned towards his lonely greatness. Was this
passion?

Could this be a new love, that unawares
Had crept thus stealthily into her heart?
And was she growing faithless to his image,
The one great master love of all her life,
Him, whose blest shadow still, — and at the
fancy
The temple of her inmost spirit shook
And rocked in its foundations.

“O my God,
My God!” she murmured, and sprang up again,
Wringing her hands, “of what avail to rack
The feeble brain with torturing thought! What
comfort,

What balm was ever found, save but with Thee!”
And so flew back into the room, and, kneeling,
Sank at the foot of the great crucifix.

“Madonna, O Madonna, sainted Virgin!” —
Was the hot prayer that burst from out her
soul, —

“Oh, if I ever strayed or swerved from thee,
Forgot thy perfect service for an hour,

I do beseech thee, grant me pardon now !
Oh, by all anguish and all ecstacies,
The sweetness and the passing bitterness,
That thou hast known, a thousand times more
 great
Than any that could pierce this petty heart ;
By all the holy joys of motherhood,
To me denied, — thy Blessed Babe's sweet smiles,
That thou couldst gather to thy happy bosom,
To serve for sunshine on the darkest path ;
By the fierce sword that rent thy travailing soul
Beneath the cross, — look down in mercy on
My agony, help thou my wrestling spirit,
Here at the feet of Thy Beloved Son, —
Thou who a woman, knowst a woman's heart,
Free me from this most cruel doubt ! ”

Long after

Marietta, who had once or twice before,
Bearing her lady's slender evening meal,
Tapped at the door without receiving answer,
Now venturing to peep in, by the dim moon-
 light
Beheld her thus, kneeling in deepest prayer,
Her face turned upward to the cross, her hands
Clasped tightly on her bosom, — and drew back
Noiselessly as she came. And later still,

Once more stole softly to the room to see
If now perchance her lady needed her ;
But starting, found her sunken with her face
Close to the ground one arm thrown out from
her

As reaching after something far away,
The other pillowing her head, from which
The golden hair, half-loosed, streamed over her
In faintly gleaming waves. She lay so still
Marietta anxiously had nigh sprung forward
To lend her aid, but that just then she stirred,
And a low moan broke from her lips, — the
words,

“O my Beloved ! turn thy face not from me !”
So once again the little maid slipped out,
To come no more that night, her delicate eye-
brows

Drawn up in mute amazement, as she shook
Her sage young head, thinking of all the mis-
chief

That poor black wasp had made !

The hours moved on
While thus Vittoria lay, sleepless, but yet
Unconscious of all sights and sounds about her.
She knew not that the moaning wind outside
Rose high and higher, — now burst the casement
open,

Then flung it loudly shut ; that the last ray
Of sickly moonlight died, leaving the room
In utter darkness, that full soon was rent
By flashes of blue light, which seemed to fill
The fitful heavens as with one sheet of flame,
The crashing thunder rolling at its heels ;
How later in the night the approaching tempest,
Which had but paused so long gathering new
power,

Burst with redoubled fury, sighed and wailed,
In whistling gusts of gushing, drenching rain,
For a brief, frenzied hour. How that too
passed,

The wind fell, the clouds parted, and at length
The undimmed stars shone out ; knew but she
heard

A long familiar, much beloved voice
Say to the troubled waters, "Peace, be still !"
And saw that they obeyed, and slowly felt
The sweetness of a calm ineffable
Descending on her soul.

When she looked up
The nightly stars had paled, the morning broke.
A new, glad dawn flushed all the cloudless
heavens.

She rose, and by a slender chain drew forth

The image of her loved one from her bosom,
And by the early, swiftly growing light
Looked on his face; and as there rose before
her

The noble form whereon so oft her eyes
Had fed in passionate joy, she knew her heart
Had never faltered in its constancy
E'en for an hour. All her great love welled up,
Shook every fibre of her heart, surged like
A swelling tidal wave through every vein,
Sent the warm life-blood flushing down into
The very hands that, trembling, held the picture,
Till all her thrilling soul o'erflowed, glowing
With ecstasy, new, yet so all familiar,
Till she let fall the crucifix one hand
Had clasped till now, and pressed in breathless
rapture

That other image to her lips and heart,
Whispering again and yet again, "Francesco!"

"Oh, what a strange, wild, fearful fever-dream
Was all this long, long night!" she sighing
thought,

Covering her burning eyes with both her hands
And in the golden morning light at length
Sought tardy slumber on her couch.

Marietta

Who, when the sun already hung full high,
Ventured to come again, found her awake
And beckoning to her to approach. She still
Was paler than her wont, Marietta fancied,
And something in the face called to her mind
The world outside, — somewhere there was a
trace

Of a great storm, but yet a calm, clear light,
More beauteous than she ever saw before,
Shone from her eyes, as in her sweet, low voice
She said, "I was not well last night, dear child,
Nor yet feel scarcely my accustomed strength,
Though I will rise. But for a day or two,
Whoe'er may come, would see no visitor,
Not even Messer Angelo. I pray you
Remember, and so tell him!"

For that day,
And yet the next, was but small need of this,
For he appeared not, but upon the third,
Towards gathering eve, he came, and so received
The message. He said naught, but bit his lip,
And with a look of mute despair slowly
Turned from the door.

The early morning brought
A letter from him, where he wrote, —

“Madonna,
See me repentant kneeling at your feet,
Imploring your forgiveness! All I spoke
Is but too true, yet I was mad to speak it!
You will not see me now, and I submit
To your decree as my just penalty,
But you will hold me not to my own word,
To banish me forever from your sight?
Such was my speech, if now I well recall
Aught that I uttered in that frenzied hour;
I have not thus offended past all hope
To win your pardon? Nevermore, I swear,
Shall you have cause to thus complain of me,
But for this once forgive me!”

And she answered,
“With all my heart I pardon, Angelo,
If one may pardon where was no offense,
And I make no complaint. Yet for a time
Methinks that it were well for both of us
We should not meet. In but a day or two
I leave the city for my summer stay
At Santa Margherita.”

She was going
For all the summer, and would suffer not
He bade farewell!—said this time not, “Come
soon

To see me, if the way is not too far!"
Though she had told him her retreat, trusting
That he would understand, and surely honor
Her mutely hinted wish.

He made no answer,
But ere the week had passed, sent her a sheet, —
The image of the Saviour on the Cross,
She once had begged of him.

And when she saw
The throbbing, thorn-crowned brow, the bleeding
side,
The hands and feet pierced by the cruel nails,
The white, parched lips, the breaking eye, where
yet

Even now, in this last agony, shone radiant
A gleam of godly hope and trust divine, —
The aching limbs, so heavy with near death,
It seemed, but for two angels that sustained Him,
He must have fallen at the feet of her
Who stood a broken image of despair,
Her form in anguish writhed, her hands stretched
upward

Beneath the suffering Son whom she had borne, —
Saw all she had so oft looked on before,
But pictured here as though 't were wrested from
The bleeding life itself, with power so wondrous

It pierced her with a pang of love and pity,
As swift and keen as though she now beheld it
For the first time, — and read below the cross,
In Angelo's bold, rugged hand, the words,
“No one hath knowledge how much blood it
costs!” —

Vittoria covered up her face, and, trembling,
Burst into passionate tears.

The languid days
Following the storms of that hot-hearted spring,
The sultry weeks of summer, came and went,
Crept slowly forward as with leaden pace,
But yet they passed, with sureness as unerring
As all the hours that borrow wings from joy.
Passed swift enough — though 't was so long
since last

He looked upon her face, or heard her voice,
Or even had some word or message from her —
To Angelo, buried in many labors,
So all absorbed in these blank days, wherein
All joy and hope seemed utterly cut off,
He sometimes nigh forgot he lived and loved her,
That heaven had once been near and earth most
fair.

And other hours again, full oft when he
Awoke in the blind stillness of the night,

All the old yearning, the sore, hungry pain,
Rose up and shook his heart.

'T were well for both
That for a time they should not meet, she wrote,
In those last, cruel lines that parted them.
A time, — but yet how long was that! — how long
Meant she this penalty, this banishment
Was to endure, this silence, that most surely
She her own self must be the first to break?
Weeks more, months, years, perchance? And if
it should be —

Forever, mayhap? And what then, he thought,
Though all his soul bled at the cruel fancy, —
What then, and if it were! Oh, what great mat-
ter! —

Another shadow in the waning days
That from the first were full of troubled darkness.
Another drop of Marah in the cup
That long has overflowed with bitterness, —
It were but this, — no more!

And then, in all
The solitude of his great spirit, cried, —
“Labor and Sleep and Death! Oh, my three
helpers,
The sole remaining friends and comforts left
To strengthen and sustain the fainting heart,

Whose slender joys contract e'er more and more
To small and smaller circles,—light the path
Grows e'er more lonely, dim, and difficult,—
Leave me not ye, at least!—desert me not,
Stand by me to the bitter end! Thou who
Through the long day dost aid me to fight bravely,
The weary battle e'er again renewed,
Of life and consciousness; thou who at night
Dost smooth my thorny, solitary pillow,
Bringst me oblivion for a little while,
Truce to all warfare here; and thou, most sure,
Most dear and welcome of them all, who at
The last shalt hand me the sweet cup of Lethe,
Forgetfulness, whence there is no awakening,—
The heavy burden presses these sore shoulders
Shall not grow all unbearable, so long
As ye are faithful,—tarry not too long
For my impatient waiting!”

And sometimes

Did he acknowledge it was well, to be
Thus stripped of every other cheer and gladness,
That all the fervor of his soul was poured,
All the deep currents of his being turned,
But into the great channel of his labors;
No foreign image now, no alien thought,
No sense of passionate desire, broke in

Upon his meditations, wooed his soul
From his immortal aims.

It was late morning
On a cool, breezy day far on in summer,
When in his workshop Angelo sat thus,
His mind and rapid hands intently bent
Upon the block of lucid marble, from
Whose heart he had carved out a beauteous image ;
A sleeping Cupid, one small, chubby hand
Supporting the round, dimpled cheek, the light
That streamed in brightly from above shedding
A life-like glow about the curly head
And finely penciled brow. He was alone
Save for Matteo, his old servant, — yet
Far more than servant, his dear, trusted friend,
Faithful companion of long years, — mutely
Busied with paints and brushes in a corner ;
And save for the stray bee that now and then
Dropped gently humming in through the great
window,
Ere long to find her pathway out again,
And for the ringing of the sharp-edged tools
The Master handled, perfect silence reigned,
Unbroken oft for hours by but a word
From either of the two. But as the bells
Chimed out from many towers the hour of noon,
A tap came at the bolted outer door.

Matteo slowly went to open, jealous
Lest his Maestro be disturbed, and holding
The door but half ajar. Outside was asked,
"Is Messer Angelo within, good friend,
And may I see him?"

Angelo's keen ear
Had caught the low, sweet sound, missed all too
long,
Of that beloved voice, and a great thrill
Half sudden joy, half old, fresh-starting pain,
Shot through his heart and shook his hand, so
that
He swiftly put the quivering chisel down,
Lest one more stroke, too hastily made, should
turn
The delicate moulding of the Cupid's lips —
That looked as from sweet flowers they just had
sipped
Fresh dew and honey, and curved gently upward
As with the sunny smile of happy dreams —
Into the downward lines of drooping sadness.

"Aye, aye, Matteo!" he called out, his voice
Unsteady as his hand, "I am within!
Pray the dear lady enter, she is welcome!"
And quickly stepping down from his high stool,

He hastened towards her, an unwonted flush
O'erspreading his dark face.

For one long instant
When first again their eyes met they stood silent
Without or word or motion, gazing deeply
And lingeringly into each other's soul.

Then Angelo's glance fell and turned aside,
Beneath Vittoria's quiet, steady eye
That wavered not, nor did the delicate color
Change in her cheeks, where now no trace re-
mained

Of that long night. But noting how the furrows
On his broad brow, the lines about his lips,
Seemed to have deepened since she saw him
last,

She stretched out both her hands to him.

“Madonna,”

He said, and swiftly seized them, “this in truth
Is passing kind in you!”

“Dear friend,” she answered,
“I come at last to thank you for that Saviour.
Forgive me that these thanks should come so
late,—

The thanks e'en yet I scarce know how to speak
Nor ever shall, perchance!”

“It pleased you, then?”

“Angelo, that is not the word! ’T is all,
And more than all my inmost soul had prayed,
Hoped, and believed of you. What after that
Could I say further? I have looked on it
Till every line is graven on my heart.”

“Madonna,” said he, in low tones, “I am
Rewarded for all pains!”

“Aye, I have come,” —
Speaking more gayly now, while her eye wandered
About the great, wide chamber, — “yet scarce
know

If ’t was permitted me to penetrate
Into your inner sanctum, dear Maestro,
Break in upon your labors!”

“You are free
And welcome to the holiest that is mine!”
And then, reading her mute desire, “I have
But little here worthy your glance, Madonna,
Yet what there is —!”

And while she thanked Matteo,
Who had been freeing from its dust and cobwebs
The sole old easy-chair he could discover,
And brought it to the lady now, he drew
The cloth he hastily had thrown over it,
Down from the sleeping Cupid.

“Ah, Maestro!

She cried, beholding it with kindling eye
And bated breath, “how fair, how wonderful!
A masterpiece, in truth; none greater e’er
Yet issued from your hands! Methinks I see
The little heart pulsate, the tender breast
Heave gently with soft breath,—the delicate
flesh

Must living throb and yield beneath my fingers,
If I should dare to touch him,—that e’en now
His eyelids quiver and his laughing eyes
Will open on us in another instant,
Lest we move cautiously! I would not wake
him,

He looks so happy thus!”

And Angelo,—

“Had I the courage that was mine, Madonna,
A little while ago, I had said boldly,
Surely he never sleeps within your presence,—
’T is but a trick!”

And only now, too late
Perceiving on what ground her foot had trenched,
The tardy flush rose to Vittoria’s brow,
And she turned from him.

Old Matteo, sharply
From his far corner watching them, marveled

His master ever stood as at High Mass,
With head uncovered, — a deep mark of reverence

Even the Holy Father scarce won from him.
For when his Holiness some time ago
Had honored them, he had but grimly doffed
His cap an instant, and then put it back.
Ah, true, the lady was most beautiful,
No royal princess ever could be fairer,
Crowned with such golden hair! — a gliding sun-
beam,

She lighted all the place, thought the old man,
His eyes long following her admiringly,
As near his master, with her slow, proud step,
She moved about the workshop, dim and dusky
At those far ends where the light, pouring freely
Through the square opening in the roof, reached
not,

And fell but through small, blinded panes, — the
Master

Uncovering all his treasures to her gaze,
As he had never known him since he lived,
To favor man or woman. The designs,
Not all yet executed or completed,
For the great tombs, — two female figures, Life
Both active and contemplative, one standing

Holding a mirror and a wreath of flowers,
The other bent upon one knee, her head
And eyes turned upward. And Matteo fancied
The lady looking at her strangely like
The kneeling image. The beloved Virgin
With her sweet Babe, holding in one dear hand
A softly feathered bird, pressed tenderly
Against the blessed heart. And this the lady
Was pleased with most of all, he well could see
Dwelt longest on, with loving, lingering eyes,
And passing admiration, — well, it was
A marvel of sweet grace and beauty !

These,

And whatsoever else he could discover,
Sketches half finished, rude first forms begun, —
And old Matteo wondered, too, how well
The lady seemed to understand their meaning, —
Above all else the towering mass of marble,
Wherein the figure of a mighty Moses
Was roughly just blocked out with few, great
strokes,

The Master showed. Angelo, submitting
Once more resistless to the quiet power,
Himself had felt her presence like the sun,
That warmed his soul revived to new glad life,
Melted the ice that round his heart had gathered.

Like to a tree, when first the joyous sap
 Swells through its stem, and sends the dawning
 hope

Of fresh, green flower through every thrilling
twig,

He knew but when the spring had come again,
How long and bleak had been the dreary winter,
How full of thirst and hunger.

Thanking him

With her sweet, sunny smile for his great courtesy,

That suffered her to feed on so much beauty,
And filled her soul with joy, she said at length
She must depart. Then, while her smile went out,
Added most gravely, —

“Angelo, methinks

"We have been parted long!"

“Ah, long, Madonna,

As an eternity!" he said, a shadow

For the first time that hour clouding his brow.

“They tell of men imprisoned in dark dungeons,
Who lived for years shut from the light of day,
But 't was not *life*, that drawing breath!”

And she

With her deep eyes fixed on him, "Angelo, I too have suffered in our separation!"

“And is my exile to endure still longer?”

He asked, the shadow deepening on his face,
“The fiat you pronounced?”

“Call it not so!”

She gently pleaded, “It was not my word ;
It was imperative necessity
We both submitted to!”

And with a fine
Significance, whose meaning he well caught,
She added, “But that hour is past, I know,
I am well sure !”

“And may I come again?”
He cried, with sudden gladness, the last cloud
Rolling away from him ; “And shall all things
Be as they were before?”

“All things,” she said,
“Only more sweet and peaceful, Angelo !”

“I thank you, thank you !” were all words he
spoke,

A deep light kindling in his eye. And then,
“Have you returned so early to the city,
While yet the summer lingers?”

Nay, I am
At Santa Margherita still. I came
But for an hour,—but to see you,” she answered,

A touch of shyness in her voice and face
That was turned from him.

“Ah, Madonna!” cried he,
“Madonna!” as he seized her hand and kissed it.

And so they parted at the door, Vittoria
Thanking him for his proffered company,
Saying Marietta waited with the mules
But a few rods away.

Thus the old life —
The glad, old life where her blest sight was ever
The golden memory of yesterday,
The never-failing promise of to-morrow,
The hope and joy, the rest and the reward
Of every toilsome day — began again.

All things were now as they of old had been,
Only, as she had said, more sweet and peaceful.
For, in remembrance of his solemn promise,
And of the anguished, unforgotten past,
Angelo, watchful, kept the fire that burned
Within his soul unquenched, unquenchable,
Covered with dampening ashes, rarely suffered
Even a small, timid flame to leap from out
The smouldering glow, that was not swiftly
smothered

When in her presence. 'T was no easy price —

Nay, a full heavy cost—to pay for such
Dear privilege of being often with her;
But yet he sometimes fancied that a part
Of this forced outer calm flowed back upon
His deepest inner life, till seeming grew
Half to reality,—lifted his spirit,
'Mid all its thirst unsatisfied, to something
Like a sublime content,—helped him to bear
The hopeless love that was his joy and anguish,
A bitter sweetness, a sweet bitterness
Whereon his soul fed, ever shifting, till
He knew not if to smile or weep.

So moved

The days and nights that grew to weeks and
months,
And these to years at length: onward once more
Upon their even course, another winter,
Another spring and summer came and went,
And yet another and another year
Saw them united in the happy peace
Of ripened, perfect friendship; there was naught,
No smallest adverse breath, no faintest discord,
Save that he ever bore within himself,
That now broke in on the sweet harmony
Wherein their spirits dwelt. One thing alone
Had grown of late into a cloud of trouble,

And anxious, pondering care, to Angelo, —
A strange expression on Vittoria's face,
Such as it never wore ere now, but his
Swift, searching eye detected instantly, —
A look of languor, of deep weariness,
That, like a dim, gray, subtle shadow, faint
And scarce perceptible, perchance, but yet
Unchecked, resistless, slowly, surely crept
O'er every feature, putting out all light there
But when he spoke to her, she smiled it off,
Said his affection was too easily troubled,
That he deceived himself: no other friend
Had marked aught change, — “No other friend,
Madonna,
Sees with such eyes as mine!” he had replied, —
Yet owned that she felt weary now sometimes
Beyond her wont.

Thus, on one afternoon, —
'T was in the city, and the early spring,
After the unwilling absence of a day,
Wherein his labor held him till late eve, —
He found her lying back upon her cushions,
Her eyes half closed, and now a change too deep
To longer be denied, in her white face.
“Madonna!” cried he, flying to her side,
All his heart's anguish quivering in his voice, —

“Madonna, you are ill, — have long been ill,
And but concealed it from me! Tell me all, —
All the whole, fearful truth!”

“Aye, Angelo,”

She said, with a faint smile, her eyes fixed on
him,

’T is true that I was ill last night, — so ill
I scarcely fancied I should see the morning.
A fever” —

“O great Heaven!” he cried again,
Striking his forehead as in swift despair,
“Did I not know, did I not long perceive
This dread misfortune coming!”

“Hush, my friend!

Be reassured, I pray you! I am better,
Far better now! After the shadowy waters
That washed my feet this night, but whence the
Lord

Was pleased to lead me safely forth once more
Unto the light of day, no need to fear, —
All will be well! Come, sit you here with me,
And let us talk of other things!”

“Ah, yes,”

He said, as he obeyed, his sudden fears
Half lulled to quiet by the confidence,
The calm assurance of her voice and words;

“My fretful soul too easily in all things
Darts forward to the last, worst, bitterest end,
And clings there hopeless!”

Then, after a pause,
Wherein he long gazed on her silently,
He asked, unwonted calm in his low voice,
“And if on the dark currents of that night,
Madonna, you had drifted out into
Eternity, had you regretted it?”

A smile so bright, it seemed a heavenly radiance
That lighted up her face with such swift glow,
Broke from her lips and eyes, —

“If those dark currents
Bear us unto the islands of the blest,
May we regret it, Angelo? Know e’en
A pang of pain at being called? Nay, rather
A thrill of joy unspeakable!” she cried,
Half stretching out her arms with sudden fervor.

“Without a pang, because she goes to him!”
His soul cried out, yet he shut down his lips.
But when she turned to him again, and saw
A great, sharp throe of pain pass o’er his face,
She said, her hand on his, —

“But I had grieved,

But sweet and brave and cheerful as of old,
And full of hope and confidence. Only
When after but brief stay he rose to go,
She said, a tremor in her gentle voice,
A tearful tenderness in the deep eyes
That rested long on him, —

“And Angelo,
So you will surely hasten back to me?
I shall much miss your face, friend, and some-
times” —

“Madonna, ah, you make me passing happy!”
He cried, not hearing in his too great ardor,
The last faint word, the broken phrase unfin-
ished, —

“Aye, surely I will pray kind heaven to lend
Wings to my hands and feet! Nay, say the
word,

And I go not at all, throw up this work,
And send some other in my stead!”

“No, no, friend,
Pray you have no such thought!” she said, most
bravely.

But when he kissed her hands, the hands, he
fancied,

Had grown more slender and more lily-white,

Even since he last had held them yesterday, —
He felt how she bent forward, touched her lips
An instant to his brow. And glancing up,
A look of doubting rapture on his face,
Saw that her eyes were brimming o'er with
tears.

“Madonna — tears — from you — for me!” he
cried,

All his whole soul convulsed with sudden tumult,
Scarce knowing his own words.

“You see,” she said,
“I am yet weak and foolish from my illness;
I shall be strong and well when you return!”
And when he would have answered, waved him
off,

With a half smile upon her quivering lips.

And so, her face turned toward him, but remem-
bering

That smile, and her last hopeful words, and
happy

In the unwonted tenderness she showed him,
He left her, with no secret, warning voice
To whisper aught of fear unto his soul,
Ignorant, suspecting not, that while he tarried,

Delayed but for a day beyond his hope,
Three times a breathless servant was dispatched
To bid him haste and come, if he would see her,
That at her door the dark-winged messenger
Had knocked and entered in.

It was late dusk,
When, travel-stained and weary, he returned,
And from Matteo heard he had been called.
Without a pause for rest, scarce taking breath
He sped along the quiet streets, his feet
Forgetting all fatigue, now winged in truth,
And yet sore clogged and clinging to the earth
With dragging, leaden weight—and reached her
house.

'T was chill and dark, windows and hall and
stairs,
And a thick, fearful silence reigned, unbroken
By but a whisper or a muffled footfall,
Only from somewhere in the night he fancied
Sounds of low weeping came.

He groped his way,
Helped by swift arrows of sharp, painful light,
That seemed to dart from out his whirling brain
And light his path, up to her well-known cham-
ber,

Whose door stood open wide. From floor to
ceiling

He saw it hung with black, and in its midst,
Tall tapers burning round, — two figures clad
In mourning, keeping watch at head and foot, —
Stood a high bier.

A piercing sword of fire,
That rent his soul in twain, — a sense as though
His quivering heart-strings burst with one wild jar,
Shook Angelo, and a mad cry of anguish
Sprang to his lips, but yet no sound came from
them ;

All reeling senses seemed to swoon an instant,
A sudden darkness gathered round his sight,
And, helpless, he threw out his hands against
The wall, lest he should sink. Then in a moment
With staggering step drew near. As in a dream
He dimly saw how the two figures moved.
And one — he had a feeble consciousness
It was her loving little maid Marietta,
Whose eyes were red with weeping — glanced at
him

And mutely made a sign to her companion.
Then they both glided noiseless from the room,
Left him alone there.

Robed in stainless white,

Her golden hair unbound and streaming down
In gleaming flood about her, the clasped hands
Folding a lily-stem, whose shining flowers
Nestled unmoved and still against her heart,
She lay before him. On her placid brow,—
Oh, now in truth to be dimmed nevermore
By faintest cloud!—a calm unspeakable,
A peace so deep, it beamed like to a light;
Upon the lips, wherein the rosy life-blood
Seemed still to linger warm, a faint, glad smile.
And something on that brow and lip struck like
A sudden chill and hush, an icy dumbness
To the wild agony, that throbbed and flamed
In every flying, fiery pulse of him
Who stood down-gazing at her.

He long stood thus,
With burning, tearless eyes, and firm-set lips,
Immovable, as turned to rigid stone,
As though all power of life were dead within
him;

Unconscious of or thought, or sense, or breath,
Feeling alone each fibre of his being
Drank in that image there, with a mad thirst
No longest gaze could quench. Then suddenly
He knelt, and leaning over kissed her hands.
But at that one swift, clinging touch, that seemed

Death-chill and yet as living flame in one,
All the sealed fountains of his anguish burst,
The bloody tears sprang gushing in his soul;
And suddenly remembering how the last time
He thus had touched her hands, she had bent
o'er him

And pressed her lips upon his brow, he rose,
And covering up his face, fled from the room,
From her mute presence, never looking back,—
Sped from the house into the silent street.

“Madonna, O Madonna!” now at length
Burst a great cry from his white, groaning lips,
As he tossed up his arms in fierce despair
Towards the wide skies. The quiet stars shone
there,—

He would not see them, they looked like her
eyes,

Her eyes that smilingly gazed down from out
A thousand gleaming places in the heavens,
Her eyes that nevermore should open on him.

“Madonna, O Madonna! mine no more
Even in such slender part of thy sweet self,
As once was lent me for a little while!
Vittoria, — friend, — beloved, — oh, my own,
Ever so gentle, passing kind and courteous,

And wherefore but her hands, and wherefore not
Her brow, her eyes, her lips?" His step grew
slower,

Then halted. Aye, he would haste back e'en now,
To kiss her lips, this one, this only time!

Oh, this one kiss in truth, should be a treasure
To bear forever! And he turned about.

Yet no, no, no, 't were better thus! Perchance
That it might break the peace upon her brow,
Quench the sweet smile upon her lips, — the lips
That nor in life nor death were ever his.

Oh, how they smiled! How all the mists and
shadows

Of late had gathered o'er that face, were rent
By that great radiance! She was far away,
And she could smile!—she was with him, that
other

Her soul had ever held more dear than all things
Of earth or heaven!

Slowly he moved again,
And wandered further, ever on and on,
Aimless, but without pause, until at length
He felt the street no longer 'neath his feet,
But grass, and broken stones, and barren stub-
ble,

And looking vaguely round with feeble wonder,

Perceived by the dim twilight of the stars
He was in the gray desert plain that stretches
Near the Eternal City, here and there
Showing some shepherd's poor, low roof amid
The broken monuments and scattered fragments
Of ancient power and splendor, — the poor shades,
Still haunting their old home, of a great glory
Long passed and half forgotten.

“It is well!”

He thought, “a fitting emblem of my life,
This blasted field, where naught remains but ruin,
And every hope is dead!”

And then beside

A fallen column split from top to base,
He dropped upon his knees and cried aloud, —
“Christ, — Jesus, — Lord, — Redeemer, — Helper,
— Saviour !

Help, save me now! If 'mid the joys of heaven
Thy soul now tastes of everlastingly,
If sitting at the right hand of Thy Father,
Thou still dost guard some aching memory of
Thy earthly agony, if Thou rememberest
The thirst that tortured Thee, the sun that
scorched, —
The thorns, the nails, the spear that pierced Thy
flesh, —

And, sharper than all else, the two-edged sword
That rent thy soul, perceiving the ill heart
Of those for whom Thou wast prepared to die,
For whom Thou gavest Thy blood and life,—
 have mercy
Upon the bleeding anguish of my spirit,
Bind up this maddening wound!"

And he sank down
As she had once, on that long other night,
His face upon the ground, one arm still clasping
The broken pillar round:—lay thus, sometimes
Half fancying the cold, still stone beside him
Was she, Vittoria,—that they both were dead,
And clasped within each other's arms, lay buried
Deep underneath the quiet earth, far from
The heat and turmoil of the world:—lay thus
As in a waking dream, his fevered brow
Pressed deep into the new, wet grass, that sprang
Among the withered stalks of last year's flowers,—
A long eternity:—heard not how from
The distant city churches midnight chimed,
Then one by one the hours of early morning.
In the far eastern heavens began to break
The faint, sweet promise of another day,
And a cool breath passed over Angelo.
He raised his head and gazed around. And then,

Remembering the last words the Saviour uttered,
With parched, white lips, and head bowed down
in death, —

He too cried suddenly out, "It is accomplished!
I give her up, my God, to Thee and him!"

But his own voice now sounded loud and strange
Unto his ear, and sank into a whisper, —

"I do submit me to my Father's will,
Shall bid my heart lie still and be content,
As surely thou hadst bid it, my beloved!

Thou Angel with the shining lily-rod,
Spirit divine of love and light and peace,

It was sufficient joy for mortal heart,

Sufficient cause for never-ending praise,

That thou wast lent me for a little while, —

Henceforward thou must be unto my soul

But as the sweetest dream it ever knew!"

Tears gushed from out his eyes, and yet again

A thrill of pain went through him, as he thought

He had not kissed her lips.

Those few who met him,

As in the gray light of the early dawn

He slowly threaded back his weary way

Through the long streets, stepped shyly from his
path,

Fancying they beheld one risen from the dead.

For three days more no one saw Angelo
About the city, none but old Matteo
Knew he had yet returned from his long journey;
Then he appeared and hastily fell to work
On a great block of finest grain, till 'neath
His restless hands there grew to life a form
That proved a pride and marvel of the world:
The image of a dying youth, — reclined,
His head thrown back, one arm tossed up above it,
The other quivering hand pressed on his breast,
Unbroken power in the broad brow, shaded
By clustering hair, but yet in the closed eyes,
The delicate nostrils, and most beauteous lips
Such subtle sense of pain, those who gazed on it
Even while their breathless lips o'erflowed with
praise,
Felt the swift tears rush to their eyes.

But he,
The master who had wrought the wondrous work,
Ne'er passed it by in after years, but that
He turned his face away, and in his soul
Rose up the words he wrote beneath the cross, —
“No one hath knowledge how much blood it
costs!”









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